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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Memorandum of Conversation

(DRAFT)

DATE: November 21, 1977

SUBJECT: HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN ARGENTINA

PARTICIPANTS: SECRETARY OF STATE VANCE
AMBASSADOR CASTRO
ASSISTANT SECRETARY TODMAN
ASSISTANT SECRETARY DERIAN
FIRST SECRETARY F. A. HARRIS, AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES
BISHOP GATTINONI - CO-PRESIDENT, PERMANENT ASSEMBLY
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
EMILIO MIGNONE - VICE PRESIDENT, PAHR
AGOSTO CONTE - MACDONALD - VICE PRESIDENT, PAHR

PLACE: AMERICAN EMBASSY, BUENOS AIRES

After introductions Mr. MacDonald outlined the history of the Argentine Permanent Assembly for Human Rights (PAHR). He said that the Assembly's hopes had been raised by the statements President Videla made during his Washington visit about the steps the government would take to improve the human rights situation in Argentina. Unfortunately, these expectations of improvements have not been fulfilled and human rights problems in Argentina remain very serious. There are no less than 6,000 disappeared persons in the country. The Permanent Assembly has received confidential information that many missing people who are officially reported as not being detained are in fact alive and are being held illegally by the government.

The Secretary asked whether Mr. MacDonald had seen the Argentine Information Service Committee's list of names of disappeared and detained persons. Mr. MacDonald replied that he had not, as the copy the Secretary had brought with him was the first to reach Argentina.

Mr. MacDonald said that there are not less than 5,000 political prisoners in Argentina who are being held in extremely poor conditions. He mentioned that the Argentine government's right of option program was an abridgement of the Constitution as the new program now left the final decision regarding a person's release in the hands of the government; before the person was automatically permitted to leave.

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(Drafting Office and Officer)

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Mr. MacDonald said that the number of human rights cases reported to the Assembly had diminished in the past two months, but that the government's anti-subversive forces were utilizing the same illegal operating principals as before. Recently, there have been several grave cases, including that of PAHR Co-President and teacher's union head Alfredo Bravo. The Assembly is convinced that Mr. Bravo's capture by security forces was triggered by the Permanent Assembly's open letter to President Videla which Bravo signed, calling for a return to legal procedures. Bravo remains in jail under executive detention although no charges have been placed against him. The second major event was the widespread railroad and utility strikes that had taken place just prior to the Secretary's visit. Mr. MacDonald said that a military communique published in the country's papers stated that a worker had been killed outright in Constitution railroad station by security forces for encouraging strike action. The person was not identified as a subversive or as having resisted arrest. In essence the security forces publicly admitted to killing a person for his strike action. Mr. MacDonald pointed this out as evidence of the lack of control in the nation's security forces.

Dr. Mignone continued the discussion stating that the Argentine armed forces had adopted a policy prior to taking over the government which has aptly been described by a French Jesuit writer as a governmental policy of fighting underground subversion with the same terrorist tactics used by the terrorists themselves.

Mr. MacDonald elaborated that these governmental terrorists tactics which include illegal capture, torture and illegal confinement, pose not only ethical problems for the government, but serious political problems as well. He stated that there is no future for democracy here unless there is a change in these procedures and the government clears up such major problems as the large number of disappeared people. The authorities must know who has been killed in the country. Today citizens are going from military command to military command trying to discover whether their children are living or dead. Dr. Mignone pointed to the mothers who have lost their children who demonstrated in the Plaza de San Martin when the Secretary placed the wreath this morning. The Secretary said he had seen them. Dr. Mignone stressed that the longer it takes to clarify the situation the harder it will be for the military Junta to revert to a democratic government, as it must retain power to resist insistent demands for an accounting of the disappeared.

Bishop Gattinoni stressed that silence is the major problem in Argentina today. The government simply does not reply to inquiries regarding disappeared persons. Assistant Secretary Todman inquired whether the Ministry of Interior, which has a hundred employees to provide information on missing persons, has been of assistance. The Permanent Assembly members agreed that in almost all cases the Ministry's office is able to provide no information regarding the detention or whereabouts of the missing relatives of the hundreds of

people who come there each day seeking information. Dr. Mignone summarized that either the government knows and refuses to say what is going on, or the government does not know and therefore cannot say what is going on. He pointed out that he does not know which condition is more dangerous for the country.

Secretary Vance related that he had raised most of these questions with the Argentine authorities during his talks. He had heard of most of the cases mentioned by the Permanent Assembly members, but had not heard of the shooting of the striking worker at the Constitution station. The Secretary said that he had presented United States views regarding these human rights problems in Argentina. He said he could not promise what the future would bring.

Assistant Secretary Derian characterized the government's human rights attitude as wooden and unyielding. She added that in August, she thought there had been changes since her earlier visit and hoped there would be continued improvement on the human rights issues. During this visit she felt disheartened, as she saw only some gestures in a tragic situation. The secretary added that he had more hope than Mrs. Derian, based on his conversations with President Videla. Bishop Gattinoni replied that the Permanent Assembly also has hopes for improvements in the human rights situation, but they are diminishing.

Dr. MacDonald mentioned that he had just reviewed President Videla's U.S. statements. President Videla said then that the Argentine government was planning to stop illegal actions, but this unfortunately had not taken place. For example in the detention of the Permanent Assembly's Co-President Bravo, the government has refused to act against those individuals who illegally captured him and has instead covered the matter up by placing Mr. Bravo under executive detention.

Bishop Gattinoni pointed out that the human rights issue transcends the national situation. The Secretary agreed commenting that he had spent several hours and gone over the transcendental importance of these human rights questions with Argentine officials. The Secretary thanked the members of the Permanent Assembly for meeting with him and stated that they had his admiration and respect for their work and their courage. The Secretary concluded by saying that the United States will continue to do all it can to help.

SUGGESTED DISTRIBUTION:

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